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For many decades — particularly since the advent of Soviet communism in 1917 — geo-political perceptions have been much distorted by the language by which we speak, write, and think about world leaders and their regimes.

- Vicious dictatorships are called "people's democracies."

- Imperialism and colonialism are called "liberation movements."

- Brutal repression is dubbed "social justice."

- Tyrants of the worst sort parade about as "progressive leaders."

The insidious effects of distorted language are nothing new. Even Confucius, in the fourth century B.C., considered the problem a crucial one. Asked what he would do if he were put in charge of the national government, the Chinese wise man responded:

"It would certainly be to correct language. If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone. If this remains undone, then morals and acts deteriorate. If morals and acts deteriorate, justice will go astray. If justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence, there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything."

In more recent times, the horrors of semantic distortion were vividly depicted by George Orwell in his great novel 1984. There, the totalitarian state created a deceptive new language — "Newspeak" — as a mechanism for removing from the people's vocabulary the truthful words by which they might construct negative thoughts about the dictatorship. Now, true to Orwell's predictions, the problem of euphemistic labeling has become so severe that it is (belatedly) becoming recognized as a most dangerous form of disinformation, or as "semantic infiltration."

In a 1978 Senate speech, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan defined the latter term as follows: "Simply put, semantic infiltration is the process whereby we come to adopt the language of our adversaries in describing political reality. The most brutal totalitarian regimes in the world call themselves 'liberation movements.' It is perfectly predictable that they should misuse words to conceal their nature. But must we aid them in that effort by repeating

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Skewing words to political advantage

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those words? Worse, do we begin to influence our own perceptions by using them?"

Mr. Moynihan's warnings against the perils of warped semantics — and the warped minds it produces — attracted only modest attention at the time. While a smattering of Op-Ed articles agreed in principle that the problem is a real one, nothing concrete was undertaken by either the government, the media, or the intellectual community to find appropriate solutions.

Finally, however, in its 1984 *Report to Congress*, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy came to grips with the ongoing perversion of political language: "We believe the times require a conscious effort to improve accuracy and political impact of words and terms used by our leaders in speaking to the world. By so doing, they can help disclose the hypocrisy and distortions of hostile propaganda. This is not a problem that will go away, and we must be prepared to deal with it on a systematic and continuing basis."

To redress the problem, this presidential commission (chaired by Edwin Feulner of The Heritage Foundation) formally recommended — and in February 1985 repeated its recommendation — that the National Security Council and the U.S. Information Agency "assess the problems of semantic corruption and institutionalize ways to counter misleading terminology and increase the accuracy of words and concepts in international political discourse."

In response to these urgings of the diplomacy commission, the NSC has recently assigned the truth-in-labeling project to a prestigious interagency task force known as the International Information Committee. The IIC is composed of about 30 information and intelligence experts from the White House (NSC), the CIA, the United States Information Agency, and the Departments of State and Defense.

Since several senior NSC staffers who are members of the group have themselves been deeply concerned about the pitfalls of warped political language, the subject is unlikely to be put on the IIC's back burner.

Currently, in fact, various members of the IIC are carefully searching for an appropriate semantic label to put on the now-nameless (!) Soviet equivalent of our Strategic Defense Initiative. If these experts are clever enough to design a name

for the Soviet SDI which is both truthful (i.e., drawn from one of the names the Soviets themselves have used) and which looks and sounds appropriate to the situation, they will have helped make it immeasurably more difficult for Mr. Gorbachev to continue pretending that his own gigantic anti-missile and anti-satellite programs do not exist.

Though the label they devise will probably not translate "Starsky Warsky," almost anything will be better from the American point of view than the "Star Peace" label by which the Soviets are promoting the lie that they have no SDI equivalent.

As time goes on, the big losers of a successful NSC/ICC project will, of course, be the Soviets and their collaborators — Castro, Qaddafi, the Vietnamese, the Sandinistas. They stand to lose the semantic masks behind which they hide their true characters and intentions. They will have a high political price to pay:

- when their "satellites" finally become known as the colonies they really are;

- when their so-called "people's guerrillas" and "patriotic fronts" are finally understood to be the *left-wing death squads* they really are;

- when their "democratic socialism" is finally recognized as nothing but a clone of Hitler's socialism — *Nazism*;

- when "liberation" once again signifies the deliverance of a people into a condition of personal *liberty*, rather than into a condition of Gestapo-left dictatorship;

- when "world peace" denotes a condition in which free men and free nations no longer have cause to war against each other — rather than a condition in which forced tranquility, founded in fear, prompts oppressed peoples and colonized nations to abandon all resistance to Soviet imperial domination.

First the diplomacy commission and then the White House have come to recognize the urgent need for what Confucius said "matters above everything" — a high standard of truth-in-labeling in the language, without which "... the people will stand about in helpless confusion."

Now, the responsibility for developing solutions has been passed to the International Information Committee, which must somehow become as dedicated and as skillful in correcting the language of politics as the Soviets have been in corrupting it. Though the task will not easily be done, a serious effort has at least begun.